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PASTORAL LETTER

THE JUBILEE OF MERCY AND THE PROMISE OF CHRIST

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

Peace to you all who are in Christ

(1Pt 5:14)

[1] On July 8, 1776, the 2,080 pound Liberty Bell rang out from the tower of Independence Hall. It summoned the residents of Philadelphia to Colonel John Nixon's public reading of the Declaration of Independence. The bell bears these words from Leviticus 25:10: "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof." A timeless message! All people desire freedom.

[2] The biblical inscription on America's iconic symbol of freedom comes from the biblical legislation concerning the Jubilee year. According to Leviticus, after seven sets of seven years, Israel was to celebrate a Jubilee. Seven is the number of completeness in Sacred Scripture. Thus, seven times seven symbolizes perfection. Since the Sabbath comes every seven days, the Jubilee, coming after seven times seven years, was seen as the Sabbath of Sabbaths. It made real among God's people his gift of freedom, the very purpose of the Sabbath itself.

[3] On the Day of Atonement, a blast of a ram's-horn trumpet (yobel) would initiate the Jubilee (yobel). During the year's celebration, ancestral property returned to its former owners; the slaves were set free; prisoners were released; debts were forgiven and the land itself lay fallow. All these acts of freedom expressed the mercy of God who freed Israel from slavery and made her his Chosen People.

[4] In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII instituted the first Christian Jubilee. He made real for the Church the deepest spiritual meaning of the biblical Jubilee. It was a year to celebrate the mercy of God who forgives our sins, returns us to our rightful inheritance lost by our first parents, releases us from slavery to sin and opens up for us the way to return to our Father's house. Since the 14th century, the Church has regularly celebrated Jubilees or Holy Years.

[5] During a penitential service in Saint Peter's Basilica on Friday, April 10, 2015, Pope Francis announced the 30th Jubilee in the Church's history. He called for an extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy out of the regular cycle of Holy Years. He stated his desire that we "...find in this jubilee the joy to re-discover and render fruitful the mercy of God, with which we are all called to give consolation to every man and woman of our time." This Holy Year begins on December 8, 2015, the Solemnity of the

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Immaculate Conception. It ends on November 20, 2016, the Feast of Christ the King (cf. Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, April 11, 2015).

[6] As a special time of grace, the Jubilee turns our minds and hearts to God who is waiting with open arms to embrace us with his love. He longs to forgive our sins and deepen our union with him. It is with this very message that Jesus opens his public ministry in the gospel of Mark. Jesus proclaims “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15).

[7] Notice that even before calling us to conversion, Jesus announces the coming of God’s kingdom. The kingdom of God is central to Jesus’ preaching. In the gospels, the term “the kingdom of God” occurs four times in Matthew; fourteen times in Mark; thirty-two times in Luke; and, twice in the Gospel of John. In true Semitic fashion, to avoid mentioning God’s name, Matthew uses the term “the kingdom of heaven” over thirty-two times. Nonetheless, both terms, “the kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven,” designate the same reality. They point to the activity of God entering into our human history and establishing his reign of love and mercy through Jesus Christ.

[8] No gospel writer focuses our attention on the mercy and compassion of Jesus more than Luke (cf. Lk 7:41 — 43; 10:29 — 37; 13:6 — 9; 15:11 — 32). As Dante once said, his is “the gospel of mercy.” Luke sees God’s mercy as the defining mark of God’s kingdom now present in Jesus.

[9] In the overture to his gospel, Luke records two great canticles, Mary’s *Magnificat* and Zechariah’s *Benedictus*. In the first, Mary praises God whose “mercy is from age to age” for “remembering his mercy and coming to save his people in Jesus” (Lk 1:49.54). In the second canticle, the father of John the Baptist gives thanks, because God “has raised up a horn for our salvation within the house of David his servant... to show mercy to our fathers” (Lk 1:69.72). Both songs are hymns in praise of God’s tender mercy (*hesed*).

[10] In reporting Jesus’ first sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, Luke gives us the only mention of the Jubilee in the entire New Testament. Jesus stands before his townsfolk and reads from the prophet Isaiah. With the last line of the text, Jesus announces that he has come “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:19). The expression “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Is 61:2) clearly alludes to the Jubilee laws in Leviticus. Thus, Jesus’ declaration that he fulfills this text is the “Liberty Bell” sounding forth the true freedom for God’s people.

[11] Throughout his gospel, Luke paints the portrait of Jesus as the one who ushers in the Jubilee. With his miracles of mercy, Jesus sets the downtrodden free and liberates the oppressed. He is the Divine Physician whose mercy makes him the friend of sinners, the helper of the needy and the consolers of the afflicted. His cross and resurrection accomplish “the total fulfillment of the messianic program that Christ once formulated in the synagogue at Nazareth” (Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 8).

[12] At the very center of Luke’s gospel, in chapter 15, the evangelist clusters the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son. These three parables reveal the overwhelming mercy of God. In the ministry of Jesus, God is not merely inviting sinners to return nor is he simply accepting those who do. Rather, He is actively going out to seek and find the lost. The heart of God beats with unrelenting mercy for each of us sinners.

[13] In Mark’s gospel, only after Jesus announces the coming of the kingdom does he call for repentance. He says, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent...” (Mk 1:15). The order is important. First, God’s grace; then, our response. God has come among us to save us in Christ. This is pure mercy. His

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saving presence, then, leads us to repentance.

[14] “God’s will is to save us, and nothing pleases him more than our coming back to him with true repentance” (St. Maximus the Confessor, Epist. 11). But even our repentance, our turning from our sins and directing our lives to God, is a gift of God’s mercy. God himself works within us so that we both will and do what pleases him (cf. Phil 2:13).

[15] The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy begins on December 8, 2015, with Pope Francis’ opening of the Holy Door of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Each diocese will open a “Door of Mercy” on December 13, 2015, the same day that the Pope opens the Holy Door of his cathedral church, the Basilica of Saint John Lateran. In the Diocese of Paterson, a Holy Door will be opened at St. Margaret Church in Morristown and at the Diocesan Shrine of St. John Paul II at Holy Rosary Church in Passaic.

[16] The image of a Holy Door is very symbolic. In John’s gospel, Jesus calls himself “the door.” He says, “Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the door (gate).Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...” (Jn 10:8-10). Entering the door or gate evokes the movement from the outside where there is danger to the inside where there is safety. Passing through the Holy Door manifests our desire to enter more fully into the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd who protects us from sin and enfolds us in his grace.

[17] By calling himself the door to the sheepfold, Jesus is claiming to be the only way of entrance into salvation. There is but one Savior of the whole human race. “There is but one Mediator between God and man...Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). In speaking with Thomas at the Last Supper, Jesus clearly states this when he says, “I am *the* way and *the* truth and *the* life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus alone opens the way to communion with God. Thus, our passing over the threshold of the Holy Door representing Christ is a profession of faith in Jesus in Christ as Savior of the world.

[18] During the Jubilee of Mercy, the Holy Father is granting a Plenary Indulgence to all who make a pilgrimage and pass through the Holy Door, whether in Rome or in their own diocese. To gain the Jubilee Indulgence, we must make a worthy sacramental confession, receive Holy Communion, recite the Creed and pray the Our Father for the intentions of the Holy Father. Even those who are physically unable to endure the hardship of a pilgrimage may gain the Plenary Indulgence. The sick, the elderly and the imprisoned should unite their suffering with Jesus, pray for the Pope, make a good confession, receive Holy Communion and assist at Mass, even if they can only do so through various means of communication.

[19] In many ways, modern theology has stepped away from the Church’s long standing custom of granting indulgences. To most of our more recently catechized young Catholics, the concept of an indulgence is unknown. To many, even to some in ministry, the idea is outdated. And, certainly, to those of other faiths, the notion is misunderstood. What, then, is an indulgence? Why do we need one? What gives the Church the privilege to grant one?

[20] Sin affects us in two ways. First, mortal sin completely breaks our relationship with God. In choosing to sin in a serious way, we close ourselves completely to God and set ourselves on the path to the eternal separation from God which is hell. In his mercy, God offers us the Sacrament of Reconciliation to repair our broken relationship and place us in the state of sanctifying grace on the path to heaven. Venial sin does not destroy our communion with God, but it does weaken it. It lessens our charity and increases our attachments to this world.

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[21] Second, whenever we sin, we not only offend God, but we harm ourselves. In sinning, our heart becomes disordered. We turn from God who is our true happiness in order to find some passing pleasure in his creatures. In confession, the priest's absolution takes away our sins for which we are truly sorry. But, his absolution does not remove the harmful effects of sin within us. These effects, these unhealthy attachments to this world, weigh us down. They cause us sufferings, both physical and spiritual, that are called the temporal punishment due to sin.

[22] We should not deceive ourselves into imagining that temporal punishment due to sin comes from an angry and vengeful God. Not at all! God is love and always loving us. The punishment for sin comes from the very nature of sin itself. In sinning, we bend our human will against God. By prayer, fasting and works of mercy, we must struggle and suffer to bend our will back toward God. And, mercy is the best way. For "[We] may cultivate [our] heart, clear the soil...root out vices, sow virtues, but if [we] do not release the springs of mercy, there is no fruit" (St Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 43). Mercy makes our heart beat in unison with the heart of God.

[25] As he has given the Church the power to forgive sins, Christ also has granted her the privilege of remitting the temporal punishments due to sin through prayers, pious works and acts of charity to which she attaches an indulgence (cf. Mt 18:18). Christ also desires us to repair the damages done to our soul by sin. He wants us to eliminate the temporal punishments due to sin. If we do not do it in this world, we will do it in Purgatory in the next. (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1472)

[26] In a particular way, during this Holy Year, Pope Francis invites us to share in the Jubilee indulgence by performing the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The seven spiritual works of mercy are admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries and praying for the living and the dead. The seven corporal works of mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and burying the dead.

[27] We who receive the abundant mercy of God are called to share that mercy with others. By our charitable acts, no matter how small, we relieve human misery and continue in our day the Jubilee that Jesus began. By our kindness and compassion to others, we stand before Christ who promises us: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7).

Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson, on the Solemnity of Christ the King, the twenty-second day of November in the year of Our Lord, two thousand and fifteen..



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